Always Together, Forever Apart

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Always Together, Forever Apart

by MarbledOpalescence

Summary

Peter Nureyev, known to many as “The Angel”, escapes execution only to get caught up in the breaking of a curse. Buddy Aurinko turns into a wolf at night, while her wife Vespa is a hawk during the day, cursed never to see each other in human form again. The Board of Fresh Start’s power is growing as well, and both Peter and the two women who have saved his life are being hunted by Juno Steel, captain of the guards and Chancellor Rasbach’s right hand man. They are operating on a rapidly shortening timeline as well; something in the curse went wrong, and both Buddy and Vespa are deteriorating in different ways. Vespa is slowly losing her grip on reality, what is real and what is fake, and it’s getting harder and harder to find her way out of the hawk mind. Buddy’s body is slowly getting weaker and she finds it harder and harder to shift out of the wolf again when the sun rises. After a visit to an old friend when Vespa gets injured, they make a plan to break the curse the only way they can think of: Killing Rasbach.

A Buddy/Vespa Ladyhawke au

Notes

Here we go!! I’m very excited for this one. I wrote it as part of the Penumbra Minibang this year, and I am really pleased with how it turned out. This was a wonderful event to be a part of!!!

The art for this fic was created by cryke-art, legend-ofzegend, and mikado.214!!! Go check them out and tell them how wonderful they are!!
Links to the art can be found here, here, and here respectively!!

See the end of the work for more notes

a Fox Among the Hens

Chapter Summary

The beginning...
Peter escapes, is found, and is wrapped up in a story bigger than he is.

(warnings for threats of violence, and a mild fight scene)

Chapter Notes

Here we go!!! I'm going to be posting a chapter a day for the next little-less-than-a-week, and I'm very excited for this one....
I started it all the way back in 2019 and I can't wait for you all to read it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Footsteps echoed down the hallway as the guards went to collect the next batch of prisoners for testing. Peter pressed himself against the wall as they went by, counting breaths until they were gone. He slipped out of the alcove he had pressed himself into and ran softly down the hallway. Now that the guards had gone to collect more prisoners, his absence would be noticed. He had to get out of there before the alarm could be raised.

Peter pulled on a cloak he found left in one of the servant's quarters and mimicked the slightly hunched walk that was so common here, slipping unnoticed through the gates among a large throng of people. As he passed under the portcullis, he heard an alarm going up behind him and smirked. As soon as he was out of eyeshot of the castle, he broke into a run.

Rasbach was standing in contemplation, staring at the map tacked up on his wall. A knock on the door interrupted his reverie.

"Come in," he called brusquely.

"My lord," came the slightly gruff reply, and Rasbach turned to face his captain of the guard, Juno Steel.

"Tell me, Captain Steel, for why have you interrupted me?
"I came to tell you, sir, that one of the prisoners has disappeared."

“Disappeared? But surely, that must mean he has escaped, no?”
“Yes, I-”

“And is it not your job, Captain Steel,” Rasbach’s voice got low and dangerous, “To make sure that the prisoners do not escape?”

Juno’s voice got flat and cold as he answered Rasbach.

“Yes, it is.”
“And furthermore,” Rasbach continued, walking around the edge of the desk to stand directly in front of Juno, “Is this fortress not supposed to be inescapable? Perhaps you can... *explain* to me how a prisoner managed to slip past all of your people and escape without a trace.” He turned his back on Juno and waved a hand dismissively. “Go. I am done with your excuses.”

“Sir. The prisoner who escaped-” Juno paused, his voice hesitant, “It was the Angel.”

Rasbach stilled and turned slowly back to face Juno.

“The Angel?”
Juno nodded affirmation.

“Then I suppose,” Rasbach said, his voice deadly quiet, “You had best retrieve him, or it will be *your* head instead of his. GO.”

Peter stumbled into the outskirts of a town, feet aching and lungs gasping. He took a moment to smooth himself down and at least attempt to flatten his hair, then slipped closer. It was a short walk from the edge of town where the buildings were sparse to where they were built a little closer together. There were few people out and about, but Peter made sure to run into at least one. The man looked well off, so Peter didn’t feel too badly about relieving him of the purse the man carried inside his tunic. Thus equipped, he made his way into a likely looking tavern.

The Inn was almost as empty as the street outside, the only other patrons a group cloaked people at the table in the corner and a lone woman at the bar looking like she was trying to drink herself into a stupor. Peter would have left again, this being too few people to really become unnoticeable in, but the bartender had already noticed him and called out a greeting. He returned it with a wave and a smile, walking up to the bar. As he walked in, one of the cloaked figures rose and passed him on their way to the door. There was the clink of metal

as they brushed past Peter, but he paid it now mind.

“What can I get for you, stranger?” The bartender asked with a friendly smile. If Peter had been less tired, he would have noticed just how forced the smile was, or the beads of nervous sweat pooling on the bartender’s forehead. But Peter had been on the move for hours now and was holding himself upright through determination, and so missed all of that.

“A drink of water?” Peter asked, perching himself on a stool. “It’s been a long day, and my throat is parched from travelling.”

The bartender nodded, pulling down a mug.

“Where are you travelling from, that you’re so tired?”

“Oh, here and there,” Peter said, waving his hand vaguely, “My sister has had a child and I’m on my way to see her.”

“A worthy goal, stranger. Do you plan on staying in town long?”
Peter laughed mildly, waving his hand airily for emphasis. “Not longer than I can help it, I’m afraid! I told her I would have been there a week ago, and yet I still have at least three days travel! Being on foot alone is a terribly slow way to travel, I’m afraid.”
“I see. Still, the day wears on. Nightfall is worryingly soon, and there have been stories of wolves in the woods as of late. Perhaps it would be best if you stayed the night here?”
“Perhaps…” repeated Peter, eyeing the bartender suspiciously. Their persistent enthusiasm had finally started to break through his weariness. “Still, there is a good amount of daylight left, and I have far to go. So I thank you for the water and the offer of rest, but I really must be going-”

“Oh no, friend stranger,” a new voice said, “I think you’ll be staying right here.” A hand fell heavily on Peter’s shoulder, pinning him and halting his rise from the stool.

Peter’s heart picked up its pace, but he forced himself to stay calm. The warble in his voice when he spoke was only half forced.

“What can I help you with, sir?”
The man whose mailed hand weighed so heavily on his shoulder huffed a laugh.

“There’s no need for pretenses anymore. You’re coming back to Cerberus with me, without fuss. You play nice with us, Angel, and

we'll play nice with you."

Peter stilled at the mention of his nickname, but didn't drop the bluff.

"Please, I'm sure you must have me confused with someone else! I'm not this "Angel," my name is Horatio-"

The door burst open, interrupting Peter, as the cloaked figure that had pushed past him earlier came back in followed by another person wearing a long cloak. This time, though, it was someone that Peter knew. Captain Juno Steel, head of the Board of Fresh Starts' guardsmen. He smiled at Peter, but it was not a friendly smile.

"Ah, Angel. So good of you to join us."

"Captain Steel," Peter acknowledged coldly, nodding briefly.

"The Angel of Brahma, so elusive for so many years—hell, you even managed to break out of *Cerberus* , and yet here I find you in the first town I look." Captain Steel walked closer, his armor clinking softly. "How the mighty have fallen."

"Well, you see-"

Peter was cut off again by the arrival of another person in a long cloak, this time black instead of the dark brown of the other guards (who Peter now realized were the group sitting at the back table) or the bright red of Captain Steel. They were brandishing a rather large crossbow.

"Juno," the woman said, pushing her hood back and revealing a stunningly beautiful face half covered by a shock of thick red hair, "I didn't expect to run into you here, but here we are."

"Captain Aurinko!" The man holding down Peter's shoulder exclaimed in surprise, turning towards the door and letting go of Peter. Captain Steel made a sharp gesture and turned to face the newcomer.

"Buddy," he said coldly, "What are you doing here?"

"I should say the same thing of you, Juno. I didn't that Rasbach usually let his prized dog go so far off the leash."

"It's Captain Steel now," he growled.

"So I've heard."

She sighed, shaking her head sadly.

“I really hoped it wouldn’t come to this, Juno.”

“You and I both know this is what it has to come down to.”

All attention in the room was focused on Aurinko where she stood in the doorway, so Peter decided that this was his best shot to try and slink out of the room unnoticed. He slid off of the stool and started to slowly back towards the rear of the room where he had already noticed a door. Steel drew his sword and pointed it at Peter without even looking and Peter froze.

“Don’t go anywhere, Ransom, I’m not done with you yet.” He pointed it back at Aurinko who regarded him sadly. “Buddy Aurinko, I am arresting you for crimes against the Board. In the name of the Board, I charge you to surrender and come quietly, and if you do so I can promise you that no harm will come to you. Come with me to Cerberus Keep and I swear that you will have a fair trial.”

“Oh Juno,” Aurinko laughed hollowly, “You and I both know that Rasbach will allow no such thing. He’ll run a quick trial behind closed doors and execute me in public as an example to all who dare disobey him. Much like this poor fool you’ve trapped here.”

Peter bristled involuntarily at the casual insult.

“Surrender,” Steel said again, more forcefully.

“I can’t.”

“Then draw your sword and stand against me!”

“No.”

Steel roared and lunged towards Aurinko.

“Fight, damn you!”

She dodged quickly to the side and kicked out with one foot as Steel’s sword flashed past her, trapping the flat of the blade between her boot and the door frame. She struck down towards his wrists with the crossbow, making him let go and skip backwards to avoid being hit. The rest of the guards had jumped to their feet as well, shoving back chairs and drawing swords. Steel barked an order and they moved swiftly into formation behind him. Peter, seeing his opportunity,

quickly ducked behind the bar. The bartender was huddling underneath it as well.

“Quickly, my friend, where is your back door?” Peter hissed.

They gestured vaguely back through the kitchen, terrified, and Peter clapped their shoulder in thanks.

As soon as he was able, he slipped out and started running again, ignoring the sounds of fighting from the other side of the bar.

He had just made it to the outskirts of town when he heard the sound of hoofbeats pounding behind him. Peter dared a glance back over his shoulder and was relieved to see that instead of the brown or red of the guards, this rider wore a black cloak. He was less relieved when he realized that they really *were* chasing him down. He tried to avoid them by dodging into the bushes along the side of the road, but just as he was diving he felt a strong hand grab his upper arm and haul him back.

“Get on,” Aurinko hissed in his face, as that was who had caught him, and he obeyed.

Clasping his hands awkwardly around her waist, he held on tightly as Aurinko urged her horse on even faster.

Aurinko stopped and Peter slid off the horse. He meant to land gracefully and start running as soon as he landed, but his legs wobbled and collapsed underneath himself as soon as he put weight on them.

“We rest here for the night, Aurinko said and swung down gracefully, her cloak swirling around her.

“It’s not yet sunset,” Peter said curiously, pulling himself up carefully, using the saddle as a support, “Surely there is at least another hour of travel we can get?”

“I don’t travel at night,” she said over her shoulder, pulling things out of the saddlebags to set up a campsite.

“Can I...ask why?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” she said dryly.

“Then can I ask why you brought me with you?”

She sighed, then turned to face him.

“I suppose you can. I brought you because I need *you* . Peter Ransom, Angel of Brahma, the only person to escape the walls of Rasbach’s prison alive. I need you to help me kill a man.”

“...I don’t follow you.”

“There is a man that I am going to kill and you are going to help me do it.”

“And what makes you so sure I’m going to go along with this?”
“I’ve seen your record, Ransom. The Angel has left his fingerprints all over this land, and I need the talents that made that possible.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that, I’m just going to-” Peter tried to step away from the horse and felt his legs collapse underneath him again.

Aurinko regarded him dryly, one eyebrow raised. “Not much of a rider, are you?”

Peter just huffed in embarrassed indignation.

“Well, if you’re just going to lie there, at least start massaging the muscles. It’ll help keep the cramps from forming.”

He grumbled, but started doing as she had suggested while she competently set up the camp. A hawk cry sounded above them and Aurinko paused a moment in her activities, holding up her heavily gloved hand. There was a sudden soft flap of wings as a hawk landed on her outstretched arm. Peter watched from his position on the ground as Aurinko cooed to the bird, petting its feathers softly. She shifted the bird onto a stand attached to the saddle that Peter hadn’t noticed before, feeding it some strips of dried meat out of a pocket.

The sun was nearing the horizon by the time she finished and came over to Peter. He hadn’t moved from where he’d fallen the second time, feeling the exhaustion of his running compounded with the fatigue from the unfamiliar ride wash over him.

“Up you get,” she said, grabbing the front of his shirt and hauling him upwards rather effortlessly. He was so tired that he didn’t even realize what she was doing until Aurinko had leaned him against a tree and was deftly tying him up.

“Wait, what-”

“This is as much for your safety as for mine,” she said, ignoring his protests. “If you go running off in the middle of the night, I can’t promise what you’ll find. If you stay near the fire, however, I can at least assure you of that much protection.

“Goodnight Angel,” she called over her shoulder, ducking into the tent with the hawk’s stand she had removed from the saddle.

Peter groaned, thudding his head back against the tree and silently cursing the exhaustion that had made his mind so fuzzy. He decided to wait at least until after the sun had set fully until working himself free in the hopes that Aurinko would have fallen asleep. Settling into the support of the ropes, he let himself relax, feeling his eyes slide shut.

Peter woke up and it was dark. The fire had burned low, the coals still glowing with a faint orange, and he blinked a couple of times, trying to reorient himself. All was quiet, so he started working at the ropes. Aurinko had positioned the knots so that none were in reach of his long fingers, but she had failed to take the knife he kept hidden at the small of his back. He freed himself easily and stood up quietly in order to not wake Captain Aurinko where she slept in her tent. He backed away slowly, watching and listening carefully for any sign that Aurinko had heard anything. When he was satisfied, he turned slowly to slip away more easily into the forest, then froze as he came face to face with a knife, glinting sharply in the light of the dying fire.

“Who the hell are you,” a hoarse voice hissed in the darkness, “And what are you doing in Buddy’s camp?”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter up tomorrow!

The Angel and the Hawk

Chapter Summary

> Peter meets Vespa at last, and they have a....*friendly* conversation. Juno lays in wait, and contemplates his actions.

Chapter Notes

> warnings: threats at knifepoint at the start of the chapter but no actual injury, fight scene at the end of the chapter with animal injury (au-typical levels of violence)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter gulped. The faint light was barely enough to illuminate the figure in front of him. He could make out a sharp nose, a pair of angry eyes that caught the light and glittered.

“I *said* ,” the woman hissed again, jabbing the knife closer, “Who the *fuck* are you and what are you doing here?”

“Ah,” Peter said, stepping quickly back away from the knife and raising his hands, thinking fast, “That. Well, you see my name is Alexandrus Shaw, and I was just-”

“Stop *lying* ,” she growled, advancing on Peter again.

“Well in that case,” Peter said, flustered, “I suppose I must. My name is Kendrick Sinclair and I am a simple hen wrangler, kidnapped by the dastardly former Captain Aurinko, and-”

“I said stop LYING,” she shouted, “I swear by the goddamned stars, if you’ve hurt one HAIR on Buddy’s head, I’ll-”

Whatever threat had been next was interrupted by a howl from the woods. They turned away from Peter and he breathed a sigh of relief, shoulders sagging a little, then watched with fascination as the woman stared intently into the forest as if waiting for something. He knew this was his chance and that he should get away while he could, but something kept him waiting and watching. The woman whistled softly and the underbrush rustled. Peter was expecting something small and harmless, perhaps even a hunting dog, but instead a large wolf came pushing through the leaves. It was a mottled dark red and black color and trotted directly up to Peter’s assailant who kneeled to

greet it, sinking her hands into its fur. Peter tried to back away unnoticed, but a twig snapped underfoot and the wolf growled at him. Immediately, the hooded woman was on her feet and back in front of him, menacing him with a knife once again.

“Not so fast, *pal* ,” she hissed, “You still owe me an explanation.”

“Alright,” Peter sighed, sagging inwards, “I’ll talk. May I at least sit?”

He took the growl to be one of permission and lowered himself to a log that Captain Aurinko had left near the fire.

“My name,” he said, “Is Peter Ransom, the Angel of Brahma. You may have heard of me.”

“Yeah, no shit, but *why* ,” the woman said, gesturing again with her knife for emphasis, “Were you tied up in my wife’s camp?”

“Your- oh. Oh!” Peter realized several things in a very short span of time: 1) That the woman who had been menacing him was none other than the Lady Vespa Ilkay, former Baroness of Rangia and missing wife of Captain Aurinko, and 2) that he was in far deeper trouble than he had originally thought.

By the time Peter finished, Ilkay was sitting too, staring off into the distance as the red and black wolf leaned heavily against her side.

“-and then she tied me to the tree and went to sleep. When I tried to escape, you found me.”

“Heh, sounds like my Bud.” Ilkay’s sharp features were softened by a smile and the flickering light of the campfire. “Taking the precaution of tying you up but forgetting to check for knives.” Her face got hard again and she leaned forward, the shadows making her face look even sharper. “I can promise you I won’t be making that same mistake.”

“What?”

“Buddy wanted you for a reason, and you obviously didn’t want to come.” She stood up and Peter leaned back nervously. “Since she needs you and you don’t want to stay, restraints seem to be needed. Hand over your knife and come with me.”

Peter reached slowly for his belt where he had tucked the knife after cutting himself loose, then ducked down and grabbed a handful of dirt

from the ground and threw it up towards Ilkay, hitting her in the face. She cried out, throwing up her arms to protect her face, but Peter was already off and running again. He heard the soft thudding of paws and glanced back over his shoulder, seeing that the wolf was right behind him. He cried out in surprise and dropped to the ground just as it leaped. It sailed over his head and then he scrambled to his feet again, running in another direction, crashing through the brush. He sighed in relief when he looked over his shoulder and saw that the wolf wasn't chasing him, until he ran into a clearing and came to a skidding halt when he saw Ilkay, two knives bared, waiting for him.

"I wouldn't try running again," she growled, "Unless you're stupider than I thought."

Peter heard another growling behind him, and turned to see the wolf slinking out of the bushes, hackles raised.

"Now," Ilkay said from behind him, "Hand over your knife."

Peter weighed his options. On a good day, he might have been able to take Ilkay, but he'd been running and riding and was still physically exhausted from that. And then there was the wolf…

He pulled the knife out of his belt and held it at arm's length. He could hear the smile in Ilkay's voice as she said, "Good," and came up behind him to take it. Peter went quietly and allowed himself to be tied again to the tree at the campsite, resigning himself to an uncomfortable night of sleep.

He watched Ilkay go into the tent with the wolf and wondered at Aurinko's ability to stay asleep, to still be sleeping through all of the commotion of his escape. He heard the murmur of quiet voices but they stopped quickly, and Peter was alone with his thoughts again. Sighing, he sagged into the support of the ropes again and tried to sleep again. Nothing would be solved tonight.

Juno stood at the top of the hill leading down into the valley, looking down over the slope and the path that led down it. Buddy would have known to move fast, but she'd been sloppy. Juno had found the trail she'd left behind, because after all a woman with flame bright hair riding a large horse is hard to miss, and most people were more than willing to help after some coercion by Juno's troops. He hated thinking of them like that, like they were soldiers rather than officers of peace, but that was the word that fit how they had been working under Rasbach's orders. He sighed. Using that sort of force left a bad

taste in his mouth, but the Chancellor had demanded results, and this was the most efficient way he knew to get them. This wouldn't have happened under Ramses, but Ramses had died and appointed Rasbach as his replacement. Juno had sworn fealty to the post of chancellor, and so he had to serve in the chancellor's guards. The feeling that he was doing something wrong, that he was *missing* something, chafed at him. He sighed again. Buddy had once been in the position where he stood, but had broken under pressure and been cast out. He couldn't make the same mistakes as she had.
"Sir?"

"What is it, Loo," he asked, not turning away from the view to look at the lieutenant.

"Uh, well." They fumbled awkwardly for a moment, looking at the ground in front of them. "They've been spotted. C-captain Aurinko and the Angel, I mean. Just east of here. Th-they only have one horse, her horse, and it's the two of them riding so we *should* be able to catch up to them if we-"

"They're going to Hyperion."

"I-what?" Loo faltered to a stop, looking confused.

"Buddy's coming back." Juno turned away abruptly, his cloak swirling around him as he strode down the hill. "She'll be taking the Marineris route, we can head her off at Becquerel. Tell the rest we're moving out."

He left Loo stammering behind him, his thoughts clarifying to a single purpose again. Buddy was close. Ransom would be with her, which meant all of this would be over soon. He sighed sharply, causing one of the younger guards nearby to look up in alarm. Juno hated this uncertainty. Buddy had to be stopped, but that didn't mean he was pleased with the tactics that Rasbach demanded. He'd be glad to wash his hands of the sour work. The sooner he caught Buddy and the Angel, the sooner all of this could be put to rights.

Peter was perched uncomfortably on the back of the horse again. It had been three days since his rescue/capture at the hands of Aurinko, and he had spent more time tied up and on a horse than not. He still didn't know all of what was going on, just that Aurinko and her wife needed him to help them kill someone. Ilkay wasn't talkative and Aurinko stopped talking to him if he asked too many questions, but what he had managed to glean from Ilkay's mutterings in the evenings

as she made dinner, or huddled in the tent with Aurinko (or so he assumed, since he never saw her after sunset), was that they were after Rasbach. It made sense, after what Rasbach had done to their reputation. He didn't know everything, but there had been stories. And after all, figures like *Captain* Buddy Aurinko and the Lady Vespa Ilkay didn't just disappear like they had without a reason.

Peter rubbed his wrists discreetly, trying to soothe the soreness that still lingered from being tied up. After that first night, Aurinko had refrained from tying him too tightly because after all, with Ilkay there the ropes were hardly needed. Ilkay still didn't trust him, he could tell. She always had a knife out when she was around him, and while Peter counted himself a good fighter there was something about the green haired lady that made him loathe to test himself against her, even on a day where he wasn't exhausted. And besides, there were stories that Ilkay had fought at the head of the Rangian military forces before she married Aurinko. He sighed, trying to shift himself and gain at least a little more feeling in his legs, when Aurinko stopped, pulling the horse up sharply.

"Captain Aurinko, what-"

She cut him off with a sharp gesture and motioned for silence. She stood up in her stirrups, looking around cautiously. It occured to Peter that the had been travelling along the road that ran along the side of the Marineris Valley for a while, and only now had it gone completely silent.

"Get down," she said quietly, settling back in her seat.

"What? But-"

"I said get *down* , Ransom!" she hissed more vehemently. "I don't like the smell of things here, and I may need to maneuver quickly on Blanche. You can walk until we're clear. It'll be better for your legs anyway," she added, flashing him a smile full of teeth.

Grumbling slightly, Peter slid off the horse, wincing as the stiff muscles in his legs stretched and glancing up in surprise as he took the knives Aurinko offered him. They went along like that for several minutes, Aurinko riding erect on her horse, Peter walking just to the side. He was about to say something when the shriek of a hawk sounded, echoing oddly in the open space. Aurinko stood up in her stirrups again and Peter paused uncertainly. Ahead of them was a collection of boulders that had fallen long ago, obscuring the path

ahead. Peter squinted, trying to see what had made Aurinko pause, when there was a sudden *hiss-thonk* as a crossbow bolt flew past his cheek, embedding itself in the sod behind him. Aurinko kicked her horse forward and drew her sword, charging towards the gap in the rocks. Peter unsheathed his knives and paused, glancing back up the road behind him. With Aurinko occupied, this might be his chance to get out…

That train of thought ended when he saw the second set of riders, wearing the brown cloaks of the guards. Swearing under his breath, he turned and ran after Aurinko. When he arrived, Aurinko was already fully in the fray, her horse rearing as she lashed out with her sword. One of the guards appeared in front of him suddenly and he lashed out with his knives, making the guard drop his sword and fall away.

He started pushing his way through, then froze when he saw Captain Steel standing up the hillside a ways and aiming a crossbow towards Aurinko.

“Captain Aurinko!” he shouted, “Look out!”

She looked up, but before either of them could do anything, a hawk came diving out of the sky at Steel, talons outstretched. He shouted and threw up one arm to save his face, throwing off the shot. Swearing, he trained his crossbow on the bird and fired. Aurinko seemed frozen as she watched in horror as the crossbow bolt went true and hit the hawk. It screamed and started falling, unable to keep itself in the air. Aurinko screamed too and kicked her horse into motion, bursting through the line guards to catch the hawk as it fell. Peter pushed through and followed to where Aurinko had halted. She swung down in a swirl of cloak and hair, tears streaming down her face.

“Here,” she said, shoving the bird into Peter’s arms and hoisting him up onto the horse, “Take Blanche, take the hawk, and ride on through the valley. In a few hours’ time you’ll see an old castle. It’s a monastery and I have a friend there who will help you, now go.”

“But Captain-”

“I said go!” she shouted and slapped the horse’s rear, urging it on. Peter held on for dear life as he tried not to jostle the bird cradled in his arms. He glanced over his shoulder once and watched as Aurinko turned and met the sword aimed at her head and blocked with her own, the clash of steel on steel ringing out over the valley. He had to

turn back and focus on the road ahead of him, holding tightly as Blanche galloped on.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter up tomorrow! i really liked writing this chapter, trying to catch vespa's character voice was fun (and i hope i did it justice)!

also, loo is here now because i said so.

The Fallen

Chapter Summary

an old friend, a new discovery, and juno wrestling with his choices

Chapter Notes

warnings for aftermath of injury, light mention of vespa's hallucinations, and violence again at the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Aurinko had disappeared over the next rise, Juno knew they wouldn't catch her today. Swearing soundly, he started barking orders, getting the guards back into some sort of order. He weighed his resources at hand. More than half of the group had sustained some sort of injury from the fight, with a third of those injured too badly to go on. They'd have to be sent back to find better medical care. Rubbing his temples to try and assuage the headache he felt coming on, he tried to assess the best course of action. Aurinko was gone. Fine, she wasn't his main target anyway. He'd have other chances to bring her down. The Angel, though...Rasbach wanted Ransom back no matter what.

Growling, he assembled a team from what was left and sent them after Ransom. Rasbach would need to be apprised of the situation and he wouldn't appreciate hearing the bad news from a subordinate. Juno watched the team ride off down the valley after Ransom, then gritted his teeth and pulled his horse around to head back to the capital. He was sick of the whole thing and it couldn't end fast enough for him.

Peter was sore all over by the time he finally found the monastery. He had ridden hard, and even after all of his time spent riding behind Aurinko, he still was not used to it. His arms were stiff as well from holding the hawk cradled carefully. AS he approached and swung down off the horse, the big doors swung open and he was met by a large man in a brown habit.

"Please," Peter gasped out before the man had a chance to speak, "We need your help."

"We?" The man in the brown habit asked, then stilled momentarily

before launching into motion again when he saw the bird in Peter's arms.

"Come in," he said firmly, catching the horse by the reins and leading it inside, "We must move quickly if I am to be ready by sunset."

By the time Peter finished taking care of the horse, the sun had well set. He went in search of where the man in the brown habit had gone with the hawk, padding softly down the nearly abandoned halls of the old monastery, his shoes scuffing lightly against the ground. He found a door left slightly ajar and was met abruptly by the man in the brown habit coming out.

"Sir please," Peter started, before catching a glimpse of the green haired woman lying in a bloodstained robe on a cot in the room behind him. "Lady Ilkay?" he gasped, not resisting as the man pushed him out of the way and back into the hallway.

"Yes."

"But, how, I was by the entrance and-"

"She came in at the same time as you," the man in the brown habit said, turning to fix Peter in place with his dark stare.

"I came in alone, it was just me and...oh. *Oooh*. The hawk is Ilkay? But how, I-"

"Come with me," the man said, turning and walking away down the hall. "There are many things I must tell you, and many more things that must be done this night."

Peter caught up with the man in brown in the courtyard. He was climbing a ladder leaned against the outer wall, and Peter hurried to follow.

"Excuse me Father," he said as he pulled himself up onto the walkway next to the man, "But what are you-"

"I am no man of the cloth."

"But you wear the habit of a monk."

"That I do, but I am not one. There may have been a time when I could have become one in the past, but that time is long past. You

may call me Sikuliaq."

"Sikuliaq then." Peter said, leaning against the ramparts. "What are we doing up here? Should we not be attending to Lady Ilkay?"

"I have done all I can for her at the moment," Sikuliaq said. "She is sleeping now, and will wake soon. In the meantime, we must prepare for the visitors we will soon have."

"What do you mean?"

"Look," Sikuliaq said simply, pointing out over the wall, and Peter turned to see. In the distance, off down the valley, he could see specks of light on the ground of torches winding their way through the darkness.

"Ah."

"You have been followed, Angel, and they are coming to collect their prize. Steel does not give up easily once he gets a trail, and Rasbach has sent his dogs out after you." Sikuliaq turned away again, striding swiftly towards one of the small towers in the wall. "They will be here before sunrise at the latest and we must be ready for them. Come along, Angel."

Peter scrambled to follow, trying to not make himself look too eager. He fell into step beside Sikuliaq, tilting his head up slightly to look at the man's face.

"How do you know Lady Ilkay? And Captain Aurinko as well, I presume."

"Buddy Aurinko saved my life many years ago and she is a very dear friend. Vespa I have not known as long, but I would do anything for them both."

"Is that why-"

"Yes. Hand me that rope."

Peter grabbed the rope that Sikuliaq pointed to and handed it over, watching as he tied it off in an efficient knot to one of the poles that leaned on the wall.

"If you don't mind me asking," Peter said hesitantly, "How did Captain Aurinko save your life?"

Sikuliaq turned and fixed Peter again with that dark-eyed stare.

“I am surprised you have not figured it out yet, Angel. Your reputation precedes you, so I am certain that mine does as well. I told you my name is Sikuliaq. I have known Buddy Aurinko for many years. If you are unable to figure out the story from there, then I fear your reputation may be unmerited.”

Thoughts started aligning in his head, stories he’d heard when he was younger, of a man untouched in battle who fought by Captain Aurinko’s side…

“Sikuliaq…*Jet* Sikuliaq? The Unnatural Disaster and Aurinko’s right hand man?”

“Indeed. We will speak of this no more, there is work to be done before your pursuers arrive.”

Sikuliaq held true to his word. He didn’t talk to Peter any more except to issue commands, and ignored any questions Peter had unless they were relevant to the exact situation at hand. Meanwhile, Peter’s head was spinning miles a minute. The Unnatural Disaster, here in front of him. Altogether totally unlike the stories but Peter didn’t doubt him for a second.

They worked through most of the night, until finally Sikuliaq told Peter to go and nap because he was swaying on his feet from exhaustion. Peter collapsed into a pile of straw in the stable, unable to make any further effort to find a proper bed, and his last thought before sleep was about how straw was never as comfortable as you hoped.

Jet stood on the wall above the gate, watching the torches get closer as the horizon gradually began to lighten with the glow that came right before dawn. He sighed, searching for the stillness in his mind that would not come. He did not regret helping Vespa, but he regretted the circumstances that required it. If there was another way, he would have taken it, but he saw nothing but the path ahead. Perhaps there were branches ahead, but in the meantime he saw none, and so was taking the only option available to him.

A voice called up to him, shaking him out of his reverie, and he went to work.

Peter was ripped from sleep by the sound of shouts from outside. He scrambled to his feet and rushed to the door and was met by the sight of a man wearing the dark brown cloak of a guard collapsing in a heap by the stable door. He looked up and saw another guard attempting climb over the wall while Sikuliaq held off three others with a long staff and immediately closed the door. Peter took a moment to compose himself, then went out the back door to go and find Ilkay. From what he knew of her already plus the stories he'd heard when he was young, he figured she'd try to take on all of the intruders single handedly, crossbow wound and all. He also knew that if anything happened to Ilkay, he wouldn't have to worry about being taken back and executed by Rasbach. Aurinko would do it herself.

She wasn't in the infirmary where she'd been left, like he suspected. He found her in one of the outer corridors, a knife bare in her hand.

"Come on," he hissed, grabbing her upper arm, careful to not jostle her wound, "We have to get out of here!"

"I'm not going anywhere, Ransom," she snarled, yanking her arm out of his hold.

"You're in no state to fight this many people-"

"Who the hell do you think you are, telling me what to do-"

"-and Aurinko will murder me if I let anything happen to you!"

"Feh, anything *else* you mean."

He gave her a pleading look and she sighed.

"Fine, but only because you look like you'll faint if I bleed anymore. What are we up against?"

"I saw four, but there are probably at twice that many, all set on finding us."

She growled, clutching her knife tighter.

"Alright, we need a way up. You know your way around this place better than me, which way to the tower?"

He pointed wordlessly and they moved off.

Peter slunk along noiselessly, all senses alert to any movement, while Ilkay trailed behind him. She was twitchy, staring around herself

untrustingly, jumping at small noises, when she paused.

“Did you see that?” She asked, staring down a dark hallway.

“See what?” Peter said, peering in the same direction, “There’s nothing there.”

Ilkay swore under her breath, running her hand through her hair and tugging it slightly to ground herself.

“Listen kid,” Peter scoffed at the nickname, “Shut it Ransom and listen. I need you to be my eyes and ears, alright? Sometimes I…well. Sometimes reality is a shaky thing, got it? I need you to see and hear for me because I can’t always trust myself, and you’re all I got right now.”

Peter didn’t respond immediately, startled at how open Ilkay was being. She growled and shoved him.

“Got it?”

“Yes, I-”

“Good, let’s go.”

She turned and stalked off, her shoulders hunched up around her ears, leaving Peter to jog slightly to catch up.

“How far are we to-” she started to ask, then was interrupted by the sudden arrival of two guards at the end of the hall.

“Ransom?”

“Real! Very real!”

There was a shout as the guards noticed them and Ilkay swore. She readied herself for their attack, but Peter pulled her into a side corridor.

“This way, we’re almost there.”

They kept their heads down and ran, the sound of footsteps from them and their pursuers echoing in the old stone halls. Peter found the door to the tower and threw it open, practically dragging Ilkay through it. They raced up the stairs, knees pumping and lungs burning, until they burst through the trapdoor in the top. Immediately Peter turned and slammed it shut, throwing the bolt and standing on top of it. Ilkay

sagged against the back wall of the balcony, breathing heavily.

“Now we wait!” Peter said grinning. Ilkay glared at him, too tired to growl. They watched as the sky gradually lightened, waiting for the sun to breach the horizon as they listened to the sounds of Sikuliaq incapacitating the intruders.

When it did, fingers of light reaching across the landscape like a sleeper stretching for the first time after slumber, Peter watched in awe and fascination as Ilkay seemed to shrink, folding in on herself and disappearing inside the bloodstained robe. As he watched, the hawk appeared and took flight, soaring in a big loop around the tower before coming to land on the wall again.

Chapter End Notes

> next chapter up tomorrow! we're moving towards endgame then >:3
> (also you guys i have a lot of meta thoughts on this fic, if you want to hear them *please* hit me up at my tumblr)

the Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

> the penultimate chapter. plans and promises are made, hopes are lifted and morals strained.

Chapter Notes

> warnings for description of what the curse is doing to buddy (what radiation sickness did to her in canon), violence, and slight grossness someone wades through a sewer)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter stood in the corner of the room, watching nervously as Aurinko sat on the examining table. He felt as though he shouldn't be here, but Aurinko had insisted. He'd noticed that everything she did she did for a reason, and somehow he trusted her, but it didn't make the moment any less uncomfortable.

Sikuliaq was inspecting her injuries with careful hands, assessing the extent of them. Peter couldn't suppress the shudder that shook through him when he saw the warped and bubbled skin that ran along the left side of Aurinko's body, the flesh of her face and eye decayed and gone. He'd known that she was ill, but this bad…. After another minute, Sikuliaq stepped back, sighing and shaking his head.

"Buddy, I am sorry, but there is nothing more I can do for you here. The curse is slowly eating away at you."

A curse…Peter's attention perked up, curious if he was finally going to get an explanation as to how Ilkay and Aurinko had ended up in this state. Aurinko sighed and placed her hand on Sikuliaq's shoulder.

"I understand, old friend. It's not your fault."

Peter watched uncomfortably, feeling like he was intruding upon a quiet moment between friends, as Sikuliaq reached up and covered Aurinko's hand with one of his own, squeezing gently.

"I am no longer able to help you here," he repeated, "But perhaps…in my research, I may have found a way for you to break the curse."

Peter stilled, not daring breathe lest he break the spell of the moment

as he watched Aurinko's face freeze.

"What have you found?"

He could hear the almost unwilling eagerness in her voice as she turned to stare directly at Sikuliaq.

"This curse...it ties both you and Vespa together, but the way it seems to have been built ties not only the recipients to each other, but the caster as well. Rasbach has bound himself to you two, and he is the key to unbinding yourselves as well."

Aurinko balled her hands into fists in the cloth of her shirt.

"How?"

"You were both present when he performed this experiment, yes?"

"Vespa and I were there to stop him, yes."

"And when it failed Rasbach blamed you both and cursed you where you stood. All three of you were there at the start and so all three of you need to be there at the end."

Aurinko laughed sharply.

"Then what are we waiting for? I'll be standing before him when I finally kill him and Vespa is never far from me during the day so it will be simple to-"

"No," Sikuliaq interrupted, his voice quiet but firm. "All three of you must be standing before each other, in *human* form."

"Ah."

The single syllable seemed to convey an entire conversation as Aurinko's expression went blank.

"I have read that it may be possible," Sikuliaq continued, "Scholars have spoken of a time when day turns to night. Not sunset, however, as it seems to mean a more immediate transition at a time when darkness is uncommon. Perhaps an eclipse, I do not know. In any case, there is still hope Buddy. Do not seek the end of things prematurely."

She sighed, closing her eye and nodding.

"Peter darling, I hope you have become more fond of riding," she said

without looking at him, “We now have a timeline.”

Juno sat alone in his room holding his head in his hands. The guards he’d sent after Ransom hadn’t returned yet which meant that he’d have to send another team to find what happened to them, as well as explain to Rasbach how he had yet again let Ransom slip away, this time with Aurinko escaping right under their noses too. *Am I really doing the right thing*, he found himself thinking, then groaned and fell backwards onto the bed, staring up at the patterns in the ceiling.

Juno had trusted Ramses, but then Ramses had died and left Rasbach in charge. If Ramses had trusted Rasbach enough to take over after him, then Juno should trust him too. And he did.

And yet…

He sighed, standing up suddenly. Striding to the door he threw it open, startling the young woman dozing outside.

“Tell Falco I need them to assemble their crew and meet me in the east gate courtyard in twenty minutes,” he snapped, “Tell them they’ve got a new assignment.”

The woman hurried to obey and Juno headed towards the east gate himself, to head them off. As long as he kept busy he could keep away the questions that plagued him, and there were more than enough problems to keep himself busy with.

Peter walked alongside Sikuliaq, his feet having long since gone numb. They only had the one horse still and while Aurinko tried to hide it, Peter could tell that her illness was worsening. So, she rode, they walked. It meant a much slower pace than any of them would have liked, and the slow approach of their destination did nothing to alleviate his mounting nerves. When they’d explained the plan to her, Ilkay had agreed more easily than Aurinko, which had startled Peter. When he asked her, she’d snarled at him, but then sighed and answered anyway.

“If it means I’d get to see her again, I’d do anything. Did you know she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met?” she asked, smiling softly as she stared into the fire. Peter had offered a bland response, too startled by how soft Ilkay had seemed just then to do anything else.

He sighed and glanced up at Aurinko. She stared solidly straight ahead, seemingly not paying attention to anything around her, but Peter knew better. It had been this way for days now.

That evening, when Ilkay was fixing dinner and everything was mostly still, Sikuliaq cleared his throat.

“Vespa, I believe I have found a way to allow you to see Buddy once again.”

She dropped the spoon and turned very slowly to look at him.

“From all evidence,” he continued, “It seems that the first light of the rising sun causes you both to change. Perhaps, if we maneuver a way to have Buddy illuminated before you, we may have a short window of time where you can both see each other again.”

“How?” she choked out, eyes glistening with tears.

“We dig a pit and you lie in the shadows while Buddy lies in the open area. When the sunlight falls on her first, she will change allowing you a brief moment before the sunlight hits you as well.”

Ilkay made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob and Sikuliaq moved to comfort her while Peter watched.

“If I’m right,” Sikuliaq murmured while Peter tried very hard to not look like he was eavesdropping, “Then in two days time you will see her again.”

The next day, Sikuliaq didn’t breathe a word of the plan to Aurinko, so Peter followed suit. He still wasn’t sure how things would go, but he knew enough at least that it was in his best interests to play a little dumb and follow along with what he was told. They were passing out of the more forested areas and into the more open terrain that was alongside the river they followed. When they had pitched camp for the night and Aurinko and Ilkay had changed forms, Ilkay, Sikuliaq, and Peter got to work. It took most of the night, but by the end they had managed to hollow out a place in the side of the old path of the riverbed. They washed themselves in the river, made some food, and then settled into the wait.

When the sky started lightening towards that soft gray that fell right before the dawn, Ilkay called the wolf to her and settled into place. Peter stood back and watched awkwardly with Sikuliaq while they waited, until finally the orange rays of the first light of the sun came

breaking over the mountains. When the sunlight hit the mottled red and black fur of the wolf, Peter gasped as she started to glow softly. The form of the wolf elongated, hair disappearing in some places and growing longer in others. It seemed like forever but also less than a moment and Captain Aurinko was lying there on the ground.

“Vespa?” she gasped, pushing herself up on one elbow to lean over her wife. “Is it really you?”

“Hi there Bud,” Ilkay said, smiling through a veil of tears, “It’s me.”

“Vespa,” Aurinko breathed as if she couldn’t believe her eyes, “My Vespa…”

She moved to lean down and embrace her wife but as she did, the sun rose higher and the light shifted. Ilkay blinked as the sunlight fell in her eyes.

“Buddy, I-” she tried to speak, but the rest of her sentence was lost as between one moment and the next, she was gone. There was the sound of wings flapping and the sound of a hawk, and then nothing. Peter didn’t argue when Sikuliaq propelled him towards the horse and where they had set up camp to start cleaning up, and only looked back once to see Sikuliaq comforting Aurinko where she lay, still crying quietly.

It was evening and Juno was walking again. He’d started a habit of going for walks in the middle of the night. Sleep didn’t come either way and it felt better to be in motion. So, he walked, and thought, and talked to himself. The other people who walked the castle at night learned quickly to avoid the captain when he was on a walk, muttering under his breath.

This night was different only in the case of what was coming the next day. Juno had been working hard for the past week getting everything in order. Appeasing Rasbach, sending out search parties, arranging the defenses for tomorrow’s ceremony- something Rasbach called his “final experiment,” whatever that meant- had all kept him busy enough that his thoughts could be occupied by that alone. Now, everything was coming to a head and Juno had no more excuses. He was alone with his thoughts and did not like it.

Again, that question came to plague him. Was he doing the right thing? He was doing what Ramses would have wanted, even if his stomach turned at some of the methods the work had necessitated.

That was what doing good was about, right? Sacrificing your own conscience in order to become the conscience for all, sacrificing yourself to protect others at any cost. That was what he had done time and again, achieving accomplishments that anyone would be proud of. And yet…

And yet.

He still was here, walking, questioning if he'd really done the right thing, if the good he did was worth the sour taste in his mouth that never seemed to leave now. Looking for an answer that did not come.

Still, whatever was coming, it would all be over tomorrow. One way or another, he would be done. Sighing, he went back to bed.

It was the day of the big experiment and Peter was surprised at how easy it had been to get into the castle. Sikuliaq drove a wagon he'd managed to procure from somewhere and while Peter and Ilkay lay huddled under a tarp and amidst a load of turnips with the wolf between them, he dealt with the questioning guard at the gate. When they started rolling again, Peter let out the breath he'd been holding.

They found the place they'd been looking for, some kind of old stone building attached to the side of the keep. And there they waited, through the rest of the night and into the cold light of morning.

There it was they planned. It went smoothly, a discussion of the plans they'd exhaustively gone over on the journey here- Peter would find a way in, Sikuliaq would stay behind with Ilkay while she was a hawk, and Aurinko would go confront Rasbach- until Aurinko spoke up.

"Jet, I have one last request for you. If I am not back by the time the bells ring, I will have failed and Rasbach will have killed me."

She said this calmly, with no expression on her face, as if she was talking about the weather rather than her own death. Peter felt uncomfortable witnessing what had obviously become an intimate moment, but there was no way he would be able to slip out unnoticed.

"If that happens, you know what I will ask you to do."

"Buddy…"

"Please, Jet. If I die, Vespa will try and come after me and I can't bear the thought of it. I need you to take her far away from here and take

care of her for me."

She laid a hand on his arm and he sighed.

"Very well. For you, I will do this."

"Thank you darling."

She turned to Peter, her focus razor sharp and pinning him in place.

"Peter. You know what I need you to do."

"Captain Aurinko," he started, trying one last time to dissuade her of following through on this desperate mission, "This is the center of Rasbach's power, you can't really-"

"All I need from you, Angel," Peter flinched at the cold tone in her voice when she used his nickname, "Is a way in. After that, you are free to go wherever you please." She turned away, her large black cloak whirling with her. "I'm sure you won't have trouble leaving us behind."

The door thudded into place behind her and Peter turned beseechingly to Sikuliaq.

"Sikuliaq, please! You can't let her do this, she's going to get us all killed."

Sikuliaq sighed heavily, turning to Peter from where he'd been looking out the window at the unusually darkening sky.

"Once Buddy Aurinko has set her mind to things, she cannot be shaken from her course. Much as it pains me to see her like this, she will not listen to me."

"But you can't just- she's asking you to run away with Ilkay if the bells toll! You can't-"

"I will not hear criticism of what I can and cannot do from a cowardly thief like you!" Sikuliaq said loudly, banging a fist against the table, making Peter jump and Ilkay shuffle and squawk on her stand. He turned away and held his forehead with one hand. "I apologize, Ransom. I should not have snapped at you. I am worried about Buddy, and...I apologize."

Peter was silent, shocked by the apology just as much as the sudden outburst, and sobered by the reminder that he was only here because

Aurinko needed him to get something done. He wasn't wanted, only needed, and his obligation to them would soon be over.

"You need to go. Buddy is waiting for you."

The door was barred from the inside, Juno had made sure of that. There was a guard stationed at each of the balconies and halls that led to this room, more guarding the floor of the room itself. He wasn't sure all of the precautions were necessary, but Rasbach had insisted. He was *worried*. He hadn't said in so many words, Rasbach didn't "show weakness," but Juno could tell.

The crowd was restless too. Rasbach was holding the ceremony at the head of the room, commanding attention, but there was an undercurrent of tension. Juno stood at the back of the room, waiting and watching.

The door was locked, Peter knew. He'd tried it as he snuck by in the halls, in the off chance that he wouldn't have to follow through on this part of the plan. The grate to the sewers was heavy but came up easily enough and he set it aside with as little noise as possible, leaving it within arms' reach. Peter sent out a quick prayer in case any gods were listening and slid down into the tunnels, pulling the grate over behind him.

The courtyard was quiet as Buddy strode in, her cloak billowing around her. She could feel the illness pulling at her but she ignored it. She couldn't deal with it now. By day's end it would be all over, one way or another.

"Hey!"

A shout came from down the hall to her left as she walked into the building and she turned to face it, unsheathing her sword in one quick movement. Two guards were facing her, fumbling to get their own weapons out. Must be new hires, she thought idly, unfamiliar faces. Buddy took care of them handily, leaving them groaning in heaps on the floor. She turned and kept walking. Someone would die by day's end, but these two were just caught up in something bigger than they were. There was no need for them to share in Rasbach's fate.

Peter held his breath as he slid through the tunnels. He hadn't

expected to be back again so soon, in fact had hoped to be far away from here by now, but fate didn't seem to be with him. Fate hadn't seemed to be with him for a long time, probably not since Brahma…

He was brought sharply out of his reverie by the sudden absence of ledge under his feet. He dropped abruptly, feet plunging into the water. Peter wasn't able to suppress his startled cry and cursed under his breath as he heard both cry and splash echoing throughout the tunnels ahead. He kept going, this time waist deep instead of only ankle deep, and tried not to think too hard about what else was in the tunnels and what, exactly, was flowing in the water.

The ceremony dragged on. Juno felt the growing tension like a crawling underneath his skin. His eye twitched and as he moved to rub it, he caught a glimpse of someone in a white hood moving cautiously through the crowds to the back of the room. Suspicious, he started moving to follow, waving off the concerned attention of Loo from their station near the wall. If there was trouble, he'd take care of it himself. The person in the white hood reached the door at the back of the room as he watched, then glanced furtively around before leaning in to fiddle with the handle. Juno's breath hitched as he caught a glimpse of the face beneath the hood. Peter Ransom, here after all. Behind him he could hear Rasbach's speech about the importance of progress and experimentation growing to a crescendo and in front of him Ransom was wrestling with the bar on the door. Juno swept his cloak back to free his hands and loosened his sword. Trouble was at hand and he needed to be ready for it.

"Only a little farther," Buddy murmured softly to herself, "Only a little more time and then all of this will be over, one way or another."

She stumbled and had to catch herself against the wall, breathing heavily as a wave of nausea rolled over her. She swallowed hard and pushed herself back up; she couldn't stop now. She was so close. Straightening her shoulders and tightening her fist around the hilt of her sword, she kept walking. The cathedral was close. She could hear the noise of the ceremony now, Rasbach's voice rising over the murmur of the crowd. She turned one more corner and there it was, the double door shut tightly. If Ransom had done his job, they should swing open easily when she reached them. If not...well. She'd solve that problem if it arose.

Peter wrestled the bar from its slot and leaned it carefully to the side,

trying to make as little noise as possible. He started to push the handle, testing if there was another lock on the door, but he stilled at the touch of a hand on his shoulder.

“Well,” a voice hummed softly in his ear, “I didn’t think you’d be foolish enough to come back at a time like this, and yet here we are.”

Peter turned slowly and met the piercing gaze of Juno Steel.

“Ah,” he said uncomfortably, leaning away and into the door, his hands busy behind his back, “Captain Steel. So good to see you again.”

Steel huffed a laugh and reached around Peter to grab his wrists and stop him working the lock. Peter tried very hard to not let the blush he felt growing at Steel’s closeness show on his face.

“Don’t patronize me Ransom, you and I both know you’re lying.”

Steel pulled Peter away from the door and pushed him back through the crowd towards the side wall, ignoring the whispers that followed behind them.

“Where’s Buddy? If you’re here, she can’t be far behind.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Cut the crap or I’ll throw you in a cell and forget about you for a year. Where-”

The doors to the hall burst open and the whole room fell silent. The crowd instinctively parted to the sides and Buddy Aurinko strode into the room.

Chapter End Notes

> the alternate summary for this chapter was "shit really pops off in this one"
> next chapter goes up tomorrow!! we're close to the end folks

a Time When Day Turns to Night

Chapter Summary

a confrontation, a reunion, an ending

Chapter Notes

warnings for swordfights, au-typical death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole room stood still, all eyes on Aurinko. Steel had unconsciously let go of Peter when he saw her walk into the room and seizing his chance, Peter slunk back into the shadows, arm still warm from where Steel's strong hand had held him. Rasbach stood at the head of the room, pale and frozen in shock.

"Chancellor Rasbach!" she shouted, her voice echoing in the silence, "I would have words with you!"

Aurinko stood erect in the center of the space that had cleared around her when she entered, her sword bare in her hand and levelled at Rasbach, her red hair flowing free. It was like a scene from a story, Peter thought wildly as he pressed back against the wall, the brave hero come to confront the evil wizard. Aurinko didn't move, her arm steady as she held the sword out. The entire room held its collective breath, waiting for the pin to drop. The moment stretched on for what felt like hours, until Rasbach seemed to come back to himself.

"Captain Steel!" he shouted, shrinking back against the dais at the head of the room. "Guards! Attack the interloper!"

Loo was the first person to move to attack, ever the first to follow orders, and Aurinko looked at them sadly as they drew their sword and stood in front of her.

"Y-you're under arrest," they stammered out, holding their sword tightly.

Aurinko just sighed. In one swift motion she disarmed them, shoving Loo to one side and kicking their sword out of range in the other direction. She advanced down the hall, the crowds pressing even further against the walls as she passed. Steel moved to intercept her, pushing out of the crowd and standing between her and the head of

the room where Rasbach stood.

“Juno,” she said sadly.

“Buddy,” he answered coldly.

“Here we are again. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, darling. If you step aside-”

“But it does. I am not afraid to fight you, Buddy. Are you?”

Without waiting for an answer, he attacked, his sword swinging in an arc of cold steel. She blocked easily, the noise of metal on metal ringing out through the room. He pushed and she staggered backwards, regaining her balance quickly. They circled each other slowly, pacing like two wolves sizing the other up. Aurinko lunged and Steel skipped back, then mirrored her attack making her skip away. Sword met sword again and again, and while Steel seemed to come out of each encounter as easily as he went in, Peter could see Aurinko tiring. As he watched, she shook her head, drops of sweat flying from her face and catching the strangely dim shafts of sunlight. At the head of the room, Rasbach seemed tired of waiting and started the ceremony again, trying to bring the experiment to a close. Peter couldn’t tell all of what he was saying, something about a better future, a shining city on a hill, a brighter tomorrow and a better way to live. He was too focused on the fight in front of him to pay any attention to the words.

After one exchange, Steel spinning away in a flourish of cloak and sword, Aurinko collapsed to the ground and Peter gasped. Steel watched cautiously as she slowly dragged herself to her feet, face gone pale and feet unsteady. Planting her feet once again, she levelled her sword at Steel once again. With a shout, Steel moved to attack again. Aurinko blocked him, mirroring the first attack, but this time Steel didn’t push her away.

“Yield!” he hissed, just loudly enough that Peter could manage to hear. “Yield, damnit, I don’t want to kill you!”

“I can’t,” Aurinko said simply, and pushed, this time sending Steel staggering backwards. Turning away, she left him on the ground and advanced towards Rasbach once again.

Rasbach’s speech was growing faster and more fervent, volume rising and words hardly making sense any longer. With a shout he reached the peak and signalled to someone standing in the balconies above. At

his mark, they started pulling on the bellropes, sending the sound tolling loud throughout the entire building.

“No!” Aurinko shouted hoarsely, running towards the head of the room. Rasbach laughed, a wild kind of triumph and reached into the font that stood on the dais.

“Stop!” a voice called from the door and the whole room froze yet again. Rasbach stared at the newcomer, horror mixed with anger mixed with something else that Peter couldn’t quite place. Aurinko turned slowly, almost petrified at the sound.

In the doorway at the back of the room stood Ilkay, dressed all in white, the dim sunlight from the window high above illuminating her softly.

“Vespa,” Aurinko breathed, so quiet that Peter more saw the word than heard it.

Ilkay started walking down the length of the room and Aurinko moved to meet her, passing Steel where he lay on the floor. Ilkay started walking faster, Aurinko matching her pace, until both were running towards each other. Ilkay was laughing, Aurinko with tears on her face and sword long since dropped. They met in the middle of the room and Aurinko lifted Ilkay in the air, spinning around once before bringing her back down and hugging her tightly, holding her wife for the first time in years.

“It’s you,” she said in disbelief, “It’s you it’s you, it’s really you.”

“It really is,” Ilkay said, pulling back slightly so she could cradle her wife’s face in her hands, “It’s really me.”

“My Vespa,” Aurinko said, leaning down to touch her forehead to Ilkay’s and cupping the back of her neck.

There was a scream from the head of the room, and Peter, startled, turned to see Rasbach turned purple with rage, raising one hand to point at the embracing couple.

“You-” he started, but never finished, as Ilkay drew a knife and threw it in one swift motion, sending him staggering backwards and knocking over the font, spilling whatever its precious contents had been.

And just like that it was over.

Chapter End Notes

aaand there it is! i hope you've liked it, this fic was super fun to write. click through to the next chapter to see the wonderful art by cryke-art!!
(and stay tuned until tomorrow for an epilogue!)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Here is the art by the incredible cryke-art!!
It's of the fight between Buddy and Juno in the last chapter. I'm putting it in a chapter of its own because it deserves to be SHOWCASED and so that I can have the image descriptions in full.

a watercolour painting of buddy aurinko in light grey armour with her smooth red hair flowing down her back. she is standing facing the pulpit of a church with her sword out in front of her. rasbach is drawn, small and in priest's dress, on the stage surrounded by candles. the only colour in the image besides grey and beige are the red of

buddy's hair and the yellow of the candleflames.

a watercolour painting of juno steel in dark grey armour with brown leather details and a flowing blue cape. he is a Black man with scars on his face and his sword up, ready to swing. he is standing in a church. the background is lined with the entrances to corridors lined

with nuns. behind him is a golden stained glass window at the top of the church. Juno looks intense and determined.

Epilogue: Where It Ends

Chapter Summary

> Aaaand a small epilogue to wrap things up. Where it ends, and hints for the future...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter stood uncertainly in the sunlight. Everything seemed to have resolved itself. With Rasbach dead, the risk of his experiments was gone. And without that driving force, Aurinko had been able to make peace with Captain Steel, making arrangements to nominate a new chancellor after things had been cleaned up a bit. Ilkay and Aurinko were headed back to a home they hadn't been able to claim as their own for over a decade, Sikuliaq back to the old monastery where he lived, and Peter…

Peter was at loose ends. He was free, no one was after him, he could anywhere and be anyone, and yet.

And yet.

He turned and stared at Hyperion's skyline, rising high on the hill, reflecting the light from shining surfaces. He thought of a pair of sharp eyes and strong hands... Peter had heard it called the most beautiful city, but he'd never had the chance to find out. Perhaps he'd find out now.

Chapter End Notes

> AND THAT'S IT, THE END OF THE WHOLE THING. i hope you enjoyed it!! i wanted to tie up the loose ends a little but still leave things open for the future, so...
> (if you want to hear more thoughts about what comes after this epilogue, hmu at my tumblr! :3)

End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this!! I had a good time writing this fic, and I am very grateful to the wonderful folks of the Penumbra Minibang for organizing this! It was a delight to be a part of. And then of course a special shout out to the incredible artists for creating the beautiful art that goes along with this! Thank you guys for being patient with my slow writing <3

I *also* want to thank my friends for cheering me on and putting up with my drama as I worked on this. You guys are the best <3

As always, I am marbledopalescence if you want to swing by and say hello!
(comments and kudos are always appreciated <3)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!